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Interview with Nariman Turebaev

By Connor Doak

Born in 1970, the Kazakh director Nariman Turebaev first received attention on the festival circuit with his short film Antiromantika *(2001) which featured in the Cinéfondation program in Cannes that year. His films* Little People *(*Malen'kie liudi, *2003) and* Sunny Days *(*Solnechnye dni, *2011) won acclaim for their sensitive exploration of themes of loneliness, alienation and economic hardship in contemporary Almaty. His most recent offering,* Adventure *(*Prikliuchenie, *2014), returns to these themes via an adaptation of Fedor Dostoevskii's "White Nights". Adventure picked up the FIPRESCI and NETPAC awards at the 2014 Eurasia International Film Festival. Currently, Turebaev is completing filming for his no-budget feature-length film* The Filth of the Big City (Griaz' bol'shogo goroda*, 2017).*

Connor Doak: Let's begin by talking about your most recent film, Adventure, based on Dostoevskii's "White Nights". Why did you choose this particular story to adapt? What challenges did you encounter transposing a nineteenth-century Petersburg text to contemporary Almaty?

Nariman Turebaev: I have a complicated relationship with Dostoevskii. I adore Russian literature and, like many others, consider the writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century to be the pinnacle of world literature. I was captivated by "White Nights" when I first read the story as a child. In school, I wrote an essay on *Crime and Punishment*, though I'm ashamed to say I hadn't read a single line of the novel (still got an A, though!) Something always held me back from reading his big novels, and it was only at the age of thirty that I mustered up the strength to sit down with *Crime and Punishment*, which I thought would be the easiest of all his novels. I read it feverishly, cover to cover, and took to bed with a temperature for a week. I literally experienced *Crime and Punishment* on a physical level, and my body couldn't cope. That was the height of my experience with Dostoevskii, as I realized that I could get through only "White Nights" and nothing else.

"White Nights" is visual literature. It's the kind of work where what's important is what you see as you are reading. I don't pay much attention to all the monologues and deliberations in the text. I only *see*: I see Nasten'ka, I see the Dreamer, and I see the city. That city isn't just St. Petersburg, it's a kind of collective image for a misty, unstable refuge for people who feel lonely or in love. So it wasn't difficult for me to imagine Almaty (or any other big city) in the place of Petersburg. And I decided to transpose everything that I see in "White Nights" to the screen, purposely disregarding all the monologues, dialogues, the excursions into psychology and the explanations of what motivated the characters' behavior. I was left with just two characters and the city. I did keep a couple of long monologues, but only because they are necessary to understand the context of the story; they are signposts in the film. I think Ainur Niiazova did a magnificent job delivering some of Dostoevskii's challenging direct speech that I kept, albeit in heavily adapted form.

For me, the key feature of "White Nights" is its emptiness. (Indeed, it's even a literal emptiness, seen when all the city folk head off to their dachas.) For me, transposing that sense of emptiness onto the screen is a real test of one's skill, a virtually unfathomable art. I'm speaking here about emptiness in the widest possible, global, sense. I'm constantly trying to achieve that: *Adventure* was my most recent attempt to do so, and "White Nights" proved to be ideal material. It's an extremely cinematographic novella, and one that directors will keep coming back to. I'm no exception.

CD: You've said that you exclude a lot of the monologues and descriptions in Dostoevskii's text. Your hero, Marat, is much quieter than Dostoevskii's Dreamer, who talks about his mood and emotions in detail. What role does silence play in your work?

NT: Silence is always present. Even at the very moment you are speaking, you are remaining silent inside, and your speech is simply the result of something that you've been figuring out for a long time, that is, something already past. It's the same thing in cinema. In fact, my films are very rich in words, and my characters' words always have a specific import for the plot. Speech is what makes up the story, the *fabula* and *syuzhet*, but speech in no way makes up the hero's inner nature. You see, the story is the fundamental thing that we offer the audience, either attracting them or antagonizing them completely. In that sense, I pay very close attention to direct speech, which is an absolute must. But in my films, I don't typically have the main character tell the story; rather, the story comes through what other characters say. The distinguishing mark of my characters is that they are rather passive

at an exterior level, and, indeed, they don't need to speak at all, thus my particular method to develop the story actually works. As a device, silence draws attention to itself; it makes people stop and think. If you're in a noisy group of people, you always pay most attention to the one person who remains silent.

CD: We've talked about *Adventure* as an adaptation, but it seems to me that your *Little People* and *Sunny Days* also draw on the Russian classics, particularly Pushkin, Gogol', and the early Dostoevskii. Of course, it was in that period that the term "little man" (malen'kii chelovek) first appeared. Has classic literature as a whole been an influence for you?

NT: My love for Russian literature was instilled in me with my mother's milk, quite literally. It was my mom, from what I remember, who was always bringing Russian classics into the house, and my parents' home still has a good library even today. I was reading Russian writers from early childhood; my very first book was *The Story of Tsar Saltan*, which I read while still in kindergarten. Pushkin means everything to me, and my love for Russian culture started with him. All Soviet children cut our teeth on his fairy tales and then we read *Evgenii Onegin* when we were older. (By the way, I have an idea for an *Onegin* adaptation that sets the story in the twenty-first century. *Onegin* feels very relevant for today's young people in this era of hipsters, internet and digital communications.) For me, the Russian classics provide a universal history of the development of the human soul; they're an inexhaustible source for reflection and inspiration. Actually, let me put it this way: the nineteenth-century Russian classics are the foundation of all contemporary world art.

CD: It has been said that "little people" is not just the title of your first film, but a common theme that unites all your work. Does your interest in "little people" stem from this particular historical moment in contemporary Kazakhstan? Or is this theme simply a timeless one that will never go away?

NT: What is a "little man"? Obviously, we are all just grains of sand, if we think on the scale of a big city, never mind on the scale of the whole planet (and nowadays we might also add the scale of the World Wide Web). Our sense of ourselves as unique, deep individuals is constantly called into doubt both by our surroundings and indeed by ourselves. Most crucially, any human being is, by nature, a creature of great doubt (of course there have been, and still are, certain people with no sense of doubt, such as certain tyrants, but that's a different matter). Russian writers observed this feature of human beings and built the entire foundation of world literature in it. As for my own work, the starting point for any new idea is self-identification, the realization that "I am a little person." And if we look at the latest scientific discoveries in neurology, we can see that the concept of the "little person" is incredibly relevant, even frighteningly so. Yes, it's a timeless theme: we're all little people, and we must always recognize that, if only for our own interior, spiritual development.

CD: From my perspective, it seems that there's a noticeable distinction between your weak, often naïve men, and your strong women, often depicted as rather unattractive characters. Where do these strong women come from?

NT: Well, what can I say? Freud, pure Freud, and nothing more. My own relationships with women have always been rather complicated and incomprehensible even for me, and that's reflected in my films whether I like it or not. I admit that I don't understand women and that I'm afraid of them. But I can't live without them. That's the problem. However, that's far from being the main theme in my films… or at least I hope that's the case.

CD: If Dostoevskii watched your *Adventure*, do you think he would recognize his Nasten'ka in your Mariam?

NT: Why not? Both are flighty, mistrustful, unpredictable, susceptible to sudden mood changes, exceptionally sentimental. And there is one thing at the root of their actions: a monstrous, even egotistical love for a particular individual. I refuse to put either of them on a pedestal. And I'm certain that the fragile and tender Nasten'ka, if she were transposed to our time, would have the toughness and bravado of Mariam.

CD: As for the men in your film, they are far from typical masculine heroes. Sociologists sometimes talk of a "crisis of masculinity" in the former Soviet Union. Do you think that there is such a crisis, and do your films reflect it?

NT: A crisis of masculinity?! I haven't heard of such a thing. If you're talking about men's infantilism, then I don't see anything bad in it; all men have it to a certain degree. As men, we constantly try to pull ourselves out of this mire of infantilization, and yet, at the same time, we expend a lot of energy in keeping our own infantilism alive. It's precisely this contradiction that drives us and sometimes allows us to create great things. It's true that the boomerang has now swung in the direction of women, and they have an innate strength on their side. And I have a feeling that some men have become infantile on purpose, and indeed, for show… I am like that myself.

CD: Now I wanted to talk a little more specifically about Viktor Tsoi. You allude to him in your *Sunny Days*: obviously the title itself is taken from a Kino song, and the film has strong links with Rashid Nugmanov's *The Needle* (*Igla*, 1988). How did Tsoi influence or inspire you?

NT: Tsoi has been with me since I was seventeen. His worldview is incredibly close to my own. If you want to know what I think and feel, just listen to his songs. But it's not just me; he was a reflection of the soul of a whole generation who grew up in the eighties. I think it's remarkable how he is still loved by young people in the post-Soviet world, just as much as before, because his romanticism, his nuanced depiction of feelings and his simplicity don't fit current realities at all. However, possibly his songs are an outlet for young people in an age of agonizing totalitarianism.

As for *The Needle*, that film inspired me to dedicate my whole life to the cinema. *The Needle* turned my life around 180 degrees. Before seeing it, the only Kazakh film that I had rated and loved and was *Shok and Sher* [a Soviet children's film from 1972, directed by Kanymbek Kasymbekov], and I honestly thought that, from the perspective of the world stage, Kazakh cinema did not exist. Then suddenly, with *The Needle*, came a film that was completely free in its spirit, a film that was tough as nails, a paradoxical film, and starring Viktor Tsoi! It's inevitable that the film transformed my consciousness.

CD: Kazakh cinema has attracted considerable interest among cinephiles around the world. Some critics even talk about a "new new wave." Do you consider yourself part of a national renaissance in cinema?

NT: I think that contemporary Kazakh cinema is still part of that "new wave" that came in the late eighties and early nineties. That wave hasn't passed or died out. The faces have changed, the themes have changed, and there are differences in the scale of talent and the distinctive identities of directors. But the spirit's the same: the spirit of the "Kazakh new wave," in which freedom, style and universality predominate, and these features combine with our ingrained nomadic perception of the world. Of course, there was a long period of stagnation in Kazakh cinema, first stemming from the chaos of the early post-Soviet period and then the incredible stupidity of certain film bosses working for the state. Nowadays, Kazakh directors have stopped depending on the state because of both external and internal factors. It's become much more difficult to get funding, but that has also given a new impulse for the development of Kazakh cinema. However, I do wish that the new talents weren't quite so cut off from the world and could manage to get rid of this taint of militant provincialism, but that's a temporary thing. There's one thing that depresses me in the contemporary Kazakh film scene: there are very, very few films shot in Kazakhstan.

CD: I'm Irish myself, so I was particularly pleased to hear about your plans for a film titled *I Love Sinead O'Connor*. Could you tell us a little more about this project?

NT: My screenplay "I Love Sinead O'Connor" follows a middle-aged, unfulfilled alcoholic over the course of a day in the city. He has lost everything and is on the cusp of an inner transformation. It's about me: I am an alcoholic (a former alcoholic, I hope), I'll soon be forty-six, and I've lost practically everything important that I ever had, and I love Sinead O'Connor. Sinead O'Connor is the key figure here, a cypher for the film. She is a symbol for the unrealized hopes and dreams of the main characters. Her free spirit and her music are the last spiritual refuge for this man who has hit rock bottom. Even though the screenplay is deeply personal and intimate, it's not an *auteur* film at all, but rather mainstream with a clearly defined narrative. I'd even say that the movie will be bright and life-affirming to some degree, completely unlike me. That's probably why potential producers have reacted to this project with skepticism: they've grown so used to seeing me only as a director of pessimistic, *auteur* cinema. But I hope that I'll find a producer who believes in this project. It really deserves that. Perhaps I should look for funding in Ireland?

CD: What other plans do you have for the future? When should we expect the next film?

NT: I have two completely separate projects in the pipeline. The first is a deeply personal project, called *Zhezkazgan*. *Zhezkazgan* is the name of my home town, a small city in the middle of Kazakhstan, a backwater that is way out in the bare, cold, steppe, the only settlement in a 400-mile radius. It's a film about returning home: the main character goes back to Zhezkazgan after many years. And it turns out that he never really left that dead-end town.

As for the second project, it develops an idea I've had since my youth. I've always been curious as to why the Soviet Union showed a certain set of American films, the majority of which came from a certain well-known Hollywood studio. A short satirical story gave rise to a screenplay, which I co-wrote with a friend, titled *The Amazing History of Michael Conrad*. The basic idea is that, during the 1950s, a large Hollywood studio is purchased by the KGB through an agent working undercover. It's a very topical piece in light of the current political situation. It's a burlesque, even a farce, and will be rather expensive to produce. Right now, we're still seeking funding for both projects, so I can't say when you will see my next film. I can only say that I've been away from filming for three years now and I'm missing it terribly.

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